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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critique of Eduardo Padron's administration at Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) in Florida. Padron has been district president at MDCC since 1995. Almost immediately after his appointment, Padron moved to centralize the school's administration. He fired employees en masse, cut and consolidated sports programs, and began shuffling campus presidents and staff from one campus to another. The author suggests that Padron began persecuting faculty at MDCC following a successful faculty union drive in 1998. In 1999, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) sent representatives to Miami to investigate the dissolution by the MDCC administration of the college's faculty senate. AAUP concluded that Padron abolished the senate as retaliation for the faculty's pro-union vote. The AAUP voted to sanction MDCC. The sanction seems to have brought deleterious effects to faculty members rather than to Padron. One professor's nomination for a fellowship was rescinded after Padron refused to endorse his own professor's nomination. The professor is sure this was the result of his involvement in the AAUP action. Padron has also been accused of inappropriate use of MDCC foundation funds. The author concludes that the MDCC board of trustees (all appointees of the governor) as well as local media, seem uninterested in examining Padron's record on any of these accounts. (NB)

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Fear and Loathing in *la Escuela*

President Eduardo Padron has instituted an impressive program of intimidation at Miami-Dade Community College

By Gaspar González

Every morning for the past year, readers of the *Miami Herald* have awakened to the smiling faces of former Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) students. "Everywhere you turn," the ad copy reads, "successful alumni." These image advertisements -- depicting professionals in respected fields such as law enforcement, health care, and journalism -- day after day reinforce the notion that the county's oldest and largest public institution of higher learning remains true to the democratic ideals upon which it was founded. Wearing toothy white grins and dark business suits, the men and women featured convey not only contentment but consensus.

In reality, however, the past few years have been acrimonious ones at MDCC. Critics say the trouble starts at the top, with district president Eduardo Padron. His persecution of the faculty following their successful union drive in 1998 already has earned the college a sanction from one of the nation's most distinguished academic watchdog organizations. Allegations of financial and administrative impropriety at the Miami-Dade Community College Foundation, the school's fundraising arm, have resulted not in investigations but in the resignations and dismissals of individuals who dared raise questions. And MDCC's once-sterling national reputation for scholarly innovation and achievement has been surpassed by its reputation for palace intrigue. Everywhere you turn at the college, there is turmoil.

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When Eduardo Padron ascended to the MDCC presidency in 1995, he commissioned a special medallion to mark the occasion. Veteran faculty were shocked by the gesture, and by the elaborateness of the Knight Center ceremony many now refer to simply as "the installation." "When I saw the medallion they had minted," remembers one retired North Campus professor, "and then the reception that followed, I said, "We're all in trouble."' Or, as another veteran North Campus faculty member puts it: "The whole thing struck me as a coronation, a celebration of a coup."

It was most definitely a changing of the guard. The outgoing president, Robert McCabe, by the end of his fifteen-year tenure, was considered a relic of sorts: a postwar white liberal living in a postmodern multiethnic cauldron. The Cuban-born, efficient, and always nattily dressed Padron, on the other hand, appeared tailor-made for the job of leading the nation's largest community college system into the future. Like the happy people in the *Herald*, he was an MDCC alum, having attended the college in the early Sixties before going on to earn a doctorate in economics from the University of Florida. He also was a long-time MDCC faculty member and administrator who had risen through the ranks to become president of the Wolfson Campus in 1985. Eduardo Padron, institutionally speaking, was one of the family.

Following his appointment as district president in 1995, however, the MDCC insider proved he had radically different ideas from his predecessors about how the college should be run. Almost immediately Padron, citing economic concerns, moved to centralize the school's administration. He eliminated positions at every campus. He fired employees en masse, including 119 on so-called Black Friday, March 29, 1996. He cut and consolidated the school's sports programs so that instead of each campus fielding a team in a particular sport, only one team would represent the MDCC system as a whole. And he began playing a game of musical

chairs that, by now, has become a staple of his administration, an almost annual shuffling of campus presidents and staff from one location to another. The fact that he implemented these changes with almost no faculty input led professors, in March 1998, to vote overwhelmingly in favor of unionization. Padron responded by disbanding the faculty senate, the institutional body on each campus responsible for overseeing academic matters (see "Schoolyard Bully," May 7, 1998).

Following a bitter contract fight, the United Faculty of Miami-Dade Community College and the administration agreed to terms in the spring of 2000. A year and a half later, and less than a year before that retroactively implemented contract is set to expire, faculty and staff (most speaking on condition of confidentiality) claim that, under Padron, the quality of education provided by the college and the institutional climate in general have declined precipitously. Worst of all, they lament, in an environment in which perceived loyalty to the man with the medallion is the new coin of the realm, there is little hope for change.

When it opened its doors in the fall of 1960, MDCC -- then called Dade County Junior College -- was the first public institution of higher education in the county. Before that, the nearest community college was in Lake Worth, and the closest public university was the University of Florida in Gainesville, more than 300 miles from Miami. (The University of South Florida, in Tampa, opened the same year as MDCC.) In 1960 the residents of metropolitan Dade had the distinction of being one of the largest urban populations in the United States lacking immediate access to a public college or university.

MDCC, however, did more than simply meet a practical need. The two-year college in postwar America became a crucial cultural institution, helping to absorb the unprecedented number of college-bound baby boomers who flooded the nation's schools. The community

college was a symbol of democratic promise, providing millions of students, many of them veterans, with the opportunity to continue their education beyond high school and participate in the expanding and increasingly information- and service-based U.S. economy.

In the Sixties the number of two-year colleges more than doubled nationally. "It seemed like a community college opened every six days," recalls Robert McCabe, who joined MDCC as an administrator in 1963. If McCabe's estimate rings somewhat nostalgic, his math is only slightly off. Between 1961 and 1970, 497 community colleges were founded in the United States, an average of one new school every 7.3 days. "I never even applied for a job at MDCC," remembers McCabe, who was wrapping up a doctoral program in community-college administration at the University of Texas when he was contacted by then-MDCC president Peter Masiko. "I was hired over the phone."

Community colleges were imbued with the Zeitgeist of John F. Kennedy's New Frontier and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. The schools welcomed not only fresh-faced administrators but nontraditional students and new ideas. No coincidence that MDCC, after initially opening as a segregated school, quickly integrated. It also became a magnet for thousands of young Cuban exiles arriving in Miami in the Sixties. By the end of the decade, minority students, who in 1960 had comprised only ten percent of the college's total enrollment, outnumbered white students.

Dade County and MDCC grew up together. By the early Seventies the college, in addition to the original campus in Northwest Dade (now known simply as the North Campus), boasted two other locations: the South Campus in Kendall (now Kendall Campus) and the Wolfson Campus in downtown Miami. Eventually MDCC would add campuses in central Miami (the Medical Center Campus), Homestead, and Little Havana (the InterAmerican Campus), for a total of six. Enrollment, which in 1960 had been 4500, climbed and ultimately exceeded 100,000

students per year.

By the Eighties MDCC was the largest and, many believed, the best community college in the nation. "The college did such extraordinary things, led on so many fronts," recalls J. Terence Kelly, who joined MDCC in 1966 and eventually rose to the post of North Campus president. "There were faculty development programs that were leading the nation. There was nothing like the television college anywhere until we started that program."

Such was the extent of MDCC's institutional reputation and political muscle that Florida International University, which opened in 1972 as part of the Florida state university system, was precluded from offering freshman and sophomore level courses -- and thus directly competing with MDCC -- until the mid-Eighties.

The college's growth years were marked by institutional stability. For the first 35 years of its history, MDCC was led by only three presidents. After its founding president, Kenneth R. Williams, left the college in 1962, Peter Masiko was named to the top spot. Masiko remained MDCC president until 1980, when McCabe, his assistant of almost twenty years, succeeded him.

Masiko and McCabe shared a similar management philosophy. "Pete and I were willing to accept mistakes and failures," explains McCabe. "Good professional people need ownership in what they're doing, need room to try things." Chemistry professor and faculty-union vice president Ana Ciereszko says McCabe practiced what he preached. "He had a way of dealing with the faculty," remembers the Cuban-born Ciereszko, who has taught at MDCC since 1976. "He had a way of making people believe what they did was important, making us believe we had a mission." McCabe also was good at keeping a low profile as MDCC president. "I thought students should relate to the campus heads, not me," says McCabe.

Sitting in his New England-style study in the two-story house he shares with his wife, noted

local historian Arva Moore Parks, the 71-year-old McCabe is the perfect picture of the retiring, and now officially retired, academic. The one-time recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant spends much of his time writing position papers and books on the state of community-college education. And deflecting questions on the current MDCC administration. "I decided when I left the college," he says, "that I did not want to cast a shadow on the place."

The current president casts his own shadow. "There's a veil of threat throughout the institution," says a Kendall campus psychology professor, before offering a textbook analysis. "It's MacGregor's X-Y theory. X: People are basically lazy and have to be watched, cajoled, threatened. Y: People are self-motivated and should be nurtured. This administration subscribes to the X theory." And, the professor admits, it has had the intended effect: "Padron's done a good job of breaking the spirit of the faculty."

With the exception of recognized union representatives, almost no faculty member, current or retired on any campus, is willing to publicly criticize the administration. The risk of being punished is too great, they say, and the possibility that specific concerns might be addressed is too small. Declining to be identified for this article, one senior faculty member put it this way: "Part of me says, "Who cares if I attach my name to my opinion?' I've got tenure, I've got a contract. But then part of me says, "Let me just finish out my time.'"

It is a sentiment so pervasive that it could become the new school song. "Why waste your time trying to fashion something that's going to be ignored?" shrugs Ciereszko. The administration, she says, didn't listen when faculty objected to general education courses being moved off the Medical Campus (forcing those students to commute to other locations to fulfill basic requirements and resulting in the transfer of a number of Medical Campus professors). And it certainly didn't care this past year when faculty disapproved of a revised summer-semester

schedule that brought students to campus fewer times per week, dramatically increasing the amount of material that had to be covered each day; a situation that, again, appeared to work to the disadvantage of both students and teachers.

"MDCC faculty used to go to conferences and people would ask us about things we were doing," says Ciereszko. "Now, I've had people ask, "What's happened to MDCC? I don't see anyone anymore.'" The reason for this, she explains, is that, in Eduardo Padron's streamlined business model of education, sending multiple faculty members from different campuses to the same conference is considered a waste of institutional resources. Others think the rationale for such a policy has less to do with economics than with Padron's personality. "It's the top-down thing," says a current North Campus faculty member. "One person attends a conference, then comes back and tells everybody else what that person thinks they need to know. That's Padron's style."

The need-to-know style extends to transfers routinely executed with little notice or regard for the hardship such moves might impose on long-time employees. "If you have always taught at the North Campus and live in Broward County," asks one recently retired professor, "can you be expected to do your best if you anticipate being transferred to the Homestead Campus the day after tomorrow?" Firings are dispensed even more summarily. "After being notified of my dismissal, I was called into the college president's office and told to get my things in order," relates Ray Dunn, an ex-dean of student services at North Campus. "By the time I got back to my desk, I could no longer log on to my computer." Dunn had worked at MDCC for 27 years. "[Security] didn't escort me out of the building," recounts Dunn, "but I can attest that happened to other people."

The cumulative impact of the changes implemented by Padron, according to some, is that a

once-vital institution now simply sloughs along, relying not on the quality of instruction it provides but on an economy of scale to survive. "If you have 50,000 full-time students and graduate 2000, are you really doing a better job than the college that has 500 students and graduates 400?" asks Ciereszko. Former North Campus president Kelly, now the chancellor of Delgado Community College in New Orleans, admits MDCC's reputation has declined relative to what it once was. "The school has gotten a lot of national exposure in the last few years, none of it very positive," offers Kelly, carefully choosing his words. "Certainly MDCC is talked about in a different light."

In 1999 the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), a prestigious nationwide organization that defends faculty rights and academic freedom, sent representatives to Miami to investigate the dissolution by the MDCC administration of the college's faculty senate. Following their investigation the organization concluded that Padron abolished the senate as retaliation for the faculty's pro-union vote and that "in the course of [Padron's] first three years as president, Miami-Dade Community College [had] moved from an institution with a mature, participatory system of academic government ... to one that is heavily dominated by the administration." Last year the AAUP voted officially to sanction the MDCC administration, a measure that profoundly damages MDCC's reputation within the academic profession.

The AAUP's verdict brought with it immediate consequences, though not for MDCC. When Kendall campus political-science professor Clifford Young was awarded a fellowship by the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) for his doctoral dissertation work, Padron became personally involved in convincing HACU to rescind the award. "Foolishly," recalls Young, "I told Padron I had gotten this fellowship. I didn't have to tell him, but I thought he'd be proud. I didn't know I'd gotten on his shit list for the AAUP stuff."

Young, a respected professor and recent recipient of an endowed chair, had been asked by fellow members of the faculty to help coordinate the visit of the AAUP investigators: pick them up at the airport, take them to their hotel, and generally show them around. He agreed. "After that I apparently became persona non grata with Padron," says the ten-year MDCC veteran. According to Young, the college president who had formerly been an enthusiastic supporter of Young's research called HACU president Antonio Flores in Texas, berating Flores for awarding Young the fellowship without first checking with him. Young was asked by the organization to decline the award.

Flores disputes Young's version, attributing the snafu to a simple misunderstanding. "It was a brand new program," explains the HACU head from his San Antonio office, "and the person running it was very inexperienced. Communication got confused." Citing protocol, he says Young couldn't even be considered for the fellowship without Padron's backing. "One of the qualifications for the award," recites Flores, sounding less like he's disagreeing with Young's account than indulging in semantics, "is that the person has to be nominated by the CEO of their institution. Dr. Padron told me that Mr. Young was not the proper representative for the MDCC system at that time." (Padron declined *New Times*'s repeated requests for an interview.)

Young did not receive his fellowship. But the harassment didn't stop there. The professor's subsequent requests for professional-development leave from MDCC, time he expected to devote to completing his dissertation (a requirement for promotion to full professor), were repeatedly denied, as were his requests for time off to attend conferences. "Low-level administrators who wanted to stay on Padron's side decided they would do their part to punish me," explains Young.

He doesn't believe Padron himself ordered the retribution. He didn't have to. "Padron,"

explains a former North Campus counselor, "surrounds himself with more and more people whose jobs are directly dependent on him." And *they* do the dirty work. "Before," recalls a 30-year MDCC professor, "you may not have liked your campus president but you knew they were intelligent and hard-working. The new view is that people are appointed to toe the line. You can't be too bright. That is seen by Padron as a threat."

The result is that Padron remains, literally and figuratively, above it all. "Whenever I approached Dr. Padron," says one former MDCC administrator, "the sense I got was, "It's a big deal you are speaking with me.' It was like getting an audience with the Queen of England." While MDCC's image in academic circles has been tarnished by its internal troubles, Padron's status in the local community remains a carefully cultivated commodity. Indeed, some would say public relations is the dapper Padron's strongest suit. "The thing Padron is most adept at is working with civic leaders and local legislators," concedes Mark Richard, a lawyer, faculty member, and faculty union president. "I know people in the community who think Eduardo walks on water," adds Ana Ciereszko. "From him they get cards and flowers for their birthdays, for promotions."

Padron is nothing if not socially and politically connected. Parties at his home often draw Miami's heaviest hitters and, often, the local press. This past April the MDCC district president's annual spring fling was featured in the Sunday society pages of *El Nuevo Herald*. The congratulatory spread bore witness to the impressiveness of Padron's personal address book. Featured on the cover of the pullout section was a full-page photo of Padron with former ambassador to Belgium Paul Cejas. Inside, prominent businessman Leslie Pantin; then-Miami Beach Mayor Neisen Kasdin; Miami mayoral hopefuls José Garcia-Pedrosa, Maurice Ferré, and Manny Diaz; and Florida Republican Party chairman Al Cardenas all were pictured having a

good time. "I am the happiest man in the world," exclaimed Padron in the accompanying article.

(Padron's happiness -- and his influence within Miami-Dade County -- were undoubtedly multiplied many times over by Manny Diaz's triumph in the Miami mayoral race this past November. No one was more prominent in the postelection orgy of supporters, well-wishers, and hangers-on than Padron, who, at the victory celebration, stood at the podium alongside Diaz and outgoing Mayor Joe Carollo. Four days later he actually held the Bible for Diaz as he was sworn into office.)

Padron's parties, famous for their lavishness and frequency, have been the source in recent years of controversy at MDCC, at least behind closed doors. In December 2000 MDCC foundation board member Juan Galan resigned from the organization after a decade of service, accusing Padron of having engineered, earlier in the year, the removal of foundation president Sandy Gonzalez-Levy in retaliation for restrictions she had placed on Padron's use of foundation funds. Padron wanted the money, according to Galan, to pay for private get-togethers in his home, parties the college president refers to as institutional "friend-raisings." The confrontation resulted not only in Gonzalez-Levy's ouster but in changes to foundation bylaws that potentially make it easier for Padron to use foundation money with little institutional oversight, a situation that, for Galan and others, poses serious ethical and legal questions (see "Power Play," January 4, 2001).

Just four months after Galan's resignation, MDCC foundation chief financial officer Eduardo Cadenas and four other upper-level foundation staff members were dismissed from their jobs. Cadenas believes his fatal sin, aside from questioning the efficacy of the foundation's fundraising strategies, was to temporarily hold up Padron's request for foundation money for a college party at the Miami Seaquarium in December 2000. Cadenas believes he acted

responsibly -- the president's two discretionary accounts were already overdrawn -- but he doesn't doubt that exercising his professional responsibility probably cost him his job (see "We Appreciate Your Concern, and Now You're Fired," April 26, 2001).

Surprisingly these incidents, potentially crossing the line from mismanagement to malfeasance, have produced little private or public outcry. Or, given Padron's gift for networking, maybe not so surprising at all. Certainly his influence over the college's board of trustees -- the one body empowered to oversee the president's performance -- appears almost complete. "It seems the trustees, instead of being appointed by the governor, were appointed by Padron," marvels Larry Wilson, a Kendall Campus biology professor and faculty-union vice president.

The six members of the board have little to no experience in the field of higher education. Instead they are a local who's who of politically savvy lawyers, entrepreneurs, and civic leaders: Coral Gables attorney Armando J. Bucelo, Jr.; former Pan American Hospital CEO Carolina Calderin; *Diario de Las Americas* editor Helen Aguirre Ferre; real estate businessman Hank Klein; former United States Attorney Roberto Martinez; and business executive Denise Mincey-Mills. (Urban League of Greater Miami CEO T. Willard Fair until recently also was a member of the board.) All serve on a volunteer basis. All are political appointments made by the governor. It's not exactly a recipe for activism. "I think the current board is just waiting for the minutes [on their respective appointments] to tick away," speculates Ciereszko. (Chairman of the Board of Trustees Roberto Martinez also failed to respond to *New Times*'s repeated requests for comment.)

If the MDCC board of trustees has expressed little interest in reviewing Padron's record, the local media have shown even less inclination for covering controversy at one of the nation's

largest community colleges. Mention of MDCC in the *Herald* is largely limited to positive pieces and the long-running image ads, which appear daily. The cost to the college of each ad, according to Padron's office, is just under $5300.

This business relationship between the college and the *Herald* became a closed-door issue in fall 2000, when Juan Galan, before his resignation from the MDCC foundation, pushed for the organization to adopt a conflict-of-interest disclosure policy. At the time the foundation board's chairman was *Herald* chief counsel Robert Beatty. To Galan, Beatty's dual role compromised the integrity of both the foundation and the *Herald,* leaving open the reasonable inference that the nonprofit organization, in the tumultuous period following Gonzalez-Levy's removal, could be purchasing, with its advertising dollars and through its connection to Beatty, the newspaper's silence. The debate itself became, if not moot, somewhat muted after Galan resigned from the foundation and Beatty stepped down as chairman.

Galan's concerns aside, the real significance of MDCC's image-ad campaign may not be the money it directs to the *Herald* but the work it performs on behalf of Padron, neutralizing criticism of his administration by perpetuating the notion that the troubled college remains Miami-Dade's little red schoolhouse, the clean, well-lighted place where every local success story begins. Never mind that the "alumni" featured, according to MDCC, need not have graduated from the college, only at one time or another attended the school. Given MDCC's long local monopoly on public first- and second-year college courses and its historically high enrollment numbers, that definition expands the field of possible featured subjects to hundreds of thousands of people. And the running joke among MDCC "alumni" is that, sooner or later, everyone in town will get their picture in the paper. Which, the way Mark Richard sees it, may be the point. "Are people featured in the ads going to start raising questions about what goes on

at MDCC?" asks the union president, in a tone that presupposes the answer.

As MDCC enters its fifth decade, there is much speculation regarding the school's future. Last year Padron led a failed attempt in the legislature that would have made Florida's community colleges the primary providers of vocational and technical education statewide. Some believe he is now reversing course, and is interested in developing a limited number of four-year baccalaureate programs at MDCC, essentially bringing the school closer to becoming a full-fledged university. If so, the administration's impending contract negotiation with the faculty union, and faculty-administration relations in general, will take on even greater significance.

On a Tuesday evening in late October, MDCC administrators and faculty members sit in the dark. They are at the college's annual dinner honoring recipients of endowed teaching chairs, and Eduardo Padron is speaking to them from three large projection screens strategically located around the Wolfson Campus conference room. It is a taped introduction to the event. Padron appears pleased, sitting at the center table, staring up at his own image.

The video portion of the program will eventually feature a brief acceptance speech by each of the sixteen honorees, played over images of the faculty member teaching a class. The recipients are grouped by campus affiliation, and at the conclusion of each campus's video segment, they are invited, one by one, to come to the stage to accept their award. Only emcee José Bahamonde, an MDCC English professor whose cadence and intonation most closely resemble that of a Fifties game-show announcer, is allowed to speak from the floor. At the conclusion of the presentations, Padron rises from his chair to congratulate the honorees and thank the audience for attending. The evening -- from presubmitted guest lists approved by the administration to the canned video presentation -- is a tightly controlled, stultifying, orchestrated affair. Exactly what faculty and administrators have come to expect from the college president.

When a guest at his table wonders why the event organizers opted for taped remarks when all the recipients are present in the room, one former professor smiles and replies, "You don't think Padron would take a chance on someone saying something he might not agree with, do you?"

It was a former dean not at the dinner, however, who might have best summed up the true significance behind the rather incongruous image of the college president watching himself on the big screen, saying, "Eduardo Padron just wants MDCC to reflect Eduardo Padron."